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## Virgil's Aeneid: Subversive Interpretation in the Commissioned Epic

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For centuries, a debate has raged regarding Virgil's motivation in writing the *Aeneid* (c.29-19 B.C.E.). Critics of Virgil claim he was a "lackey to Augustus" (Hardie 115) and that the *Aeneid* merely serves to praise Augustus Caesar and the Roman empire. Not only do these critics reference the fact that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* under the commission of Augustus Caesar, they also maintain that the use of the epic style serves to celebrate the Roman empire. After all, such critics point out, the epic is "that branch of oratory whose business is to praise" (79). However, scholars of opposing opinion argue that Virgil, unable to directly attack Augustus or Rome without punishment, left underlying messages meant to present his intention "as essentially subversive of the regime, especially in its ending" (Williams 185). These proponents point to the final scene in particular, claiming that "It is Aeneas who loses at the end" (185) by succumbing to violence rather than embracing mercy. They claim Aeneas is ultimately a symbol for both Augustus and Rome, and that in the end Virgil presents this symbol as flawed if not entirely failed. At its core, this debate demonstrates the struggles of individual interpretation, and the consequential changes in meaning that can be derived from it. Ultimately, Virgil did not present a singular message one way or the other. Instead, Virgil showed the paradox of the Roman empire, contrasting its noble ideals with its harsh reality.

Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* when commissioned by the Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar. Caesar came to power c.31 B.C.E. with the birth of the Roman empire after decades of destructive civil war destroyed the Roman republic. Although this period came to be known as the Golden Age or *pax romana* (Roman peace), at the time "it was not certain that the new order... would outlast the lifespan of its none too robust leader" (Hardie 117). This uncertainty, especially after an extended period of violence and chaos brought about by civil war from c.49 B.C.E. to 31 B.C.E., may have been what prompted Augustus to commission the *Aeneid*. In the

work, the founding of Rome and its resultant eternity of peace, prosperity, and rule by the descendants of Aeneas, and in particular Augustus Caesar, is foretold by prophecy.

However, even though Virgil uses this prophecy of glory and peace to depict the founding of Rome, he ultimately presents it as paradoxical. When Aeneas is in the underworld, his father, Anchises, tells him how he will “restore our wounded state... to pacify, to impose the rule of law, to spare the conquered” (Virgil 190; bk. VI; ln. 1143-1154). Ultimately, this vision for the Roman empire is one of lasting peace, in which the Romans will restore order and mercy in the aftermath of chaos and war. Yet the path to that goal is laden with violence, which the second half of the *Aeneid* depicts through the bloody war between the Latins and the Trojans. The irony that Aeneas, and by extension Augustus, will achieve peace through violence can be interpreted as a subtle message of subversion incorporated by Virgil. Although the prophecy praises the fate that is to come, the underscored message of bloodshed and destruction undermines any idealized picture of Rome as a benevolent empire. To add to this disillusionment, Aeneas exits the underworld through the ivory gate through which “false dreams are sent... to the upper world” (191; bk. VI; ln. 1214-1215). This implies that all of what Aeneas has been told in the underworld, including the greatness of Rome and the success of his descendants, is nothing but a “false dream” (191; bk. VI; ln. 1214). This once again emphasizes the idea that Rome’s Golden Age is merely an idealization, and not reality.

In the *Aeneid*, the proclamation of fate that spurs Aeneas to action legitimizes the rule of Augustus by setting a precedent of divine rule. Julius Caesar, at the height of his power, was known as “Divine Julius” and this became “the model for deification of subsequent Roman emperors, including... Augustus” (Hardie 100). In other words, Julius Caesar established a precedent for divine right that the rulers that followed assumed, including his adopted son,

Augustus Caesar. The fact that Aeneas is fated to found Rome, and that he knows his descendant Augustus will “extend his power Beyond the Garamants and Indians, Over far territories north and south” (Virgil 188; bk. VI; ln. 1067-1069) implies the role of manifest destiny: a belief that it is the will of god, or gods, that a nation will expand. Virgil does not leave this point up to interpretation. Rather, he goes so far as to call him, “Caesar Augustus, son of the deified” (187; bk. VI; ln. 1064). In associating Caesar with the divine, Virgil provides what Augustus sought: validation of his right to rule.

However, Virgil also casts a shadow upon Augustus’s claim to divine right. While discussing Aeneas’ descendants, he goes into detail about what Augustus Caesar is to accomplish. He states that Augustus will “bring once again an Age of Gold” (187; bk. VI; ln. 1065), which starts as praise. However, in a more specific description of how this era of prosperity arises, he includes the reactions of the nations that will be conquered and brought under the rule of the empire as terrified victims. “At that man’s coming even now the realms... tremble, warned By oracles, and the seven mouths of the Nile Go dark with fear” (188; bk. VI; ln. 1073-1076). The mention of oracles in particular is significant, as oracles communicate directly with the gods. The oracles, and by extension the gods, express their messages as a warning, something to fear rather than celebrate. If the gods, like the oracles, depict the fated Roman empire in this negative light, the idea of divine right becomes suspicious. For even though they foretell that the Roman empire is destined to be, the element of fear casts doubt on whether or not the gods support this destiny. Either way, like Aeneas’ own prophecy, the fate presented for Augustus is ironic. Once again, the irony that peace will be accomplished through violence and fear, contradicts the idealization of Rome as a merciful nation and bringer of peace.

Aeneas, the ancestor of Augustus, is “a model for the deeds of his historical descendant” (Hardie 93). He, too, seems to have some form of divine right, evidenced both by his fate and by the support of many of the gods. He is even the son of a goddess, Venus. This blood connection can certainly be seen to imbue him with deified properties, especially since his descendant Augustus is labeled “son of the deified” (Virgil 187; bk. VI; ln. 1064). Venus, in particular, is invested in the outcome of Aeneas’s fate. She is worried by the meddling of Juno, and Jupiter comforts her by saying, “As promised, you shall see Lavinium’s walls... No new thought has turned me” (12; bk. I; ln. 349-351). In doing so, Jupiter reveals that he and any of the other gods have control over Aeneas’s fate. It is Jupiter’s promise that Aeneas will complete his destiny that finally calms Venus. Ultimately, this implies that Aeneas’s fate is only possible because of Jupiter’s good will, and is thus divine providence.

Nevertheless, Virgil once again creates dimensions within the more obvious narrative of the *Aeneid*. After all, if Aeneas does indeed have divine right, and thus the backing of the gods, why does Juno, a goddess, act against him? From the beginning, Juno acts as Aeneas’ antagonist. The very first reason for Juno’s enmity towards the Trojans is the prophecy that they will one day conquer her favorite city, Carthage. Prior to this prophecy, it was generally thought that “fate permitting, Carthage would be the ruler of world” (4; bk. I; ln. 37-38). But fate is not on Juno’s side, and instead the Trojans (who will found Rome) are granted that destiny. Virgil continues on to list additional reasons for Juno’s hatred in a short parenthetical, “the judgement Paris gave, Snubbing her loveliness; the race she hated; The honors given ravished Ganymede” (4; bk. I; ln. 40-42), all of which are pettier than the fear of her city’s destruction. By putting this short list in parentheses, Virgil implies these reasons are less important. These reasons, which center on jealousy, cast Juno in a less sympathetic light and maintain Aeneas’ role as the hero

and hers as the antagonist. It is important, however, to note that Virgil listed her fear first, even though the other reasons provided happened before this fate came to light. Because he did not present her motives in chronological order, Virgil shows that although fear is not the first reason for her enmity, it is the most important. This fear likely resonated with those who feared the power of the Roman empire and its expansion through warfare. By using fear as the reason for Juno's attacks on Aeneas, Virgil avoids the black and white story of the hero overcoming the jealous goddess. Rather, the work questions whether Juno's fear is justified, which is evident in his word choice when describing the future Trojan invaders as having "ample kingdoms" and being "arrogant in war" (4; bk. I; ln. 34). As Virgil questions whether or not Juno's fear is justified, he also questions whether her decision to lash back against fate and divine right is also correct. By making this justification, not only does Virgil present a character willing to fight against the establishment of the Roman empire, he presents a powerful goddess who does not support Aeneas' claim to divine right. However, Juno is ultimately unable to overcome fate, and concedes her struggle. Even though she appears to lose her feud against Aeneas because he still manages to found Rome, she does get to witness the undermining of Aeneas' character in the end, and perhaps by extension the character of Augustus and even Rome itself.

In these ways, by presenting the prophecy as paradoxical, casting doubt on Aeneas' claim to divine right, and giving Juno valid reasons to oppose Aeneas, Virgil does not blindly serve to praise Augustus or Rome, despite writing in the form of the epic under commission. Rather, the *Aeneid* is "designed to check the impulse to violence, a production, in other words, of an idealized and idealizing vates (prophets) of the Augustan period" (Bartsch 329). The undertones of this work depict war and conquest in a negative light, as something that consumes people and unravels the ideals of society. The fact that this is achieved through the genre of the epic, make

the themes all the more effective, as it “shows us the inherent dangers of epic (and perhaps Homeric) narrative by suggesting that epic actually nurtures violence within those cultures whose order its discourse purportedly preserves” (335). This is evident in epics such as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Those works were written to celebrate warrior culture, a culture in which violence and warfare are necessary to maintain warrior values. However, Virgil’s use of the epic to depict an undercurrent of violence within Rome’s culture is much subtler. The art sought to reflect upon *pax romana* ideals of peace and prosperity, rather than warrior culture. Yet violence was still certainly part of Rome’s culture, as can be seen through its history of slavery, religious persecution, gladiators, and other public bloody spectacles. Virgil kept such elements present in his use of the epic. Like the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* divides into two halves. From the somewhat peaceful journey of the Trojans and the light-hearted games in the first half of the *Aeneid*, which demonstrate Aeneas’s fairness and mercy alongside pretend acts of war, to the actual war in the second half of the *Aeneid*, during which Aeneas’ virtues succumb, the genre of the epic allows Virgil’s underlying messages apparent. Despite a hopeful beginning and good intentions, the final actions of bloodlust ultimately counterbalance, if not entirely negate, the surface idealism of the work.

Throughout the epic, Aeneas acts almost as ideally as the prophecy about him. He is loyal when he searches desperately for his wife until her ghost tells him he must leave to fulfill his prophecy, as fated. He is fair when he rewards all his men during the war games. Most importantly, he is merciful when he stops the fight between Entellus and Dares when he sees that Dares is defeated. In the midst of war, he still holds onto these values, proclaiming that if he wins, “both nations, both unconquered, both subject to equal laws, commit themselves to an eternal union” (Virgil 374; bk. XII; ln. 257-259). In this claim, Aeneas declares his respect for

both his own men and for the men of Latinus. He also promises the men of Latinus that his goal is not to vanquish or destroy them, but rather to join with them. This ideal Aeneas is also a personification of ideal Rome: powerful enough to conquer its enemies, and merciful enough to spare the conquered and bring them into the prospering empire.

Just as Virgil questions the reality of this ideal Rome, he also questions the reality of this ideal Aeneas. Like the prophecy, the surface image of Aeneas is one of idealism and peace. It, too, is undermined by the realities of violence. In the final scene of this epic, Aeneas reaches an opportunity to deliver mercy and begin the transition to peace. He defeats Turnus, the leader of the Latinus army, and Turnus, kneeling before him, asks Aeneas to “go no further Out of hatred” (402; bk. XII; ln. 1275-1276). Nevertheless, just as it seems the pious Aeneas will spare him and demonstrate the idealized values of Rome, he sees Pallas’ belt, worn by Turnus as a battle trophy, and gives in to rage. Knowing Turnus killed Pallas, Aeneas tosses aside all thoughts of mercy, and kills Turnus. In this moment, Aeneas also kills his own honor. He is no longer the ideal hero. Rather, the ugly violence that Virgil subtly weaves throughout the epic reaches the surface through his action. The revelation of Aeneas’s violence is linked to the man and the nation he represents: “the negative side of one-man rule, as harbinger of the political ethics of emperor and empire” (Williams 186). Because the character and story of Aeneas is reflective of Augustus and the founding of the Roman empire, the failure of Aeneas to live up to his ideal, and his submission to such vices as rage, vengeance, and violence, are ultimately reflections on Augustus and the Roman empire as unable to live up to the ideals they present, instead, succumbing to savagery in order to maintain their power.

Virgil does not present a singular message. Rather, his reflection on the founding of Rome through this use of epic can be seen as an attempt to “banish the binary alternatives that



ideology offers us, precisely by invoking the impossibility of dictating artistic interpretation even as Augustus begins his turn to an ideological artistic program at Rome” (Bartsch 339). In essence, Virgil’s work neither is wholly in accordance with Augustus’ wishes, nor wholly opposed to it. Though he plainly presents the ideals of Rome, and though he mixes in elements of hypocrisy and contradiction, he is ultimately not making a definite claim about Aeneas, Augustus, or Rome. Rather, he is putting forth his work for interpretation by the Roman people, allowing for complex and subtle variations in what people take away as the possible meaning of the work. In doing so, Virgil did not write the *Aeneid* for Augustus, even though Augustus commissioned it. In addition, Augustus could not control the message of the work, no matter what level of control he may have had over Virgil, because he could not control how individuals interpreted the work for themselves. Instead, Virgil’s work stands independent of Augustus’ authority, while never conspicuously claiming to do so. Virgil also avoided definite defiance against the society he was a part of, continually praising the accomplishments of Rome. The beauty of Virgil’s *Aeneid* defies his critics’ claims and allows many interpretations and debates regarding the political context of the epic to continue to this day.

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